

**CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
PORTER SQUARE DESIGN PROJECT
MEETING NOTES**

Subject: Porter Square Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) – 3/13/03 Meeting

Date, Time & Place: March 13, 2003, 6:30 PM – 8:30 PM
North Cambridge Senior Center

Present: CAC Members: Doug Berman, Al Gowan, Glen Heinmiller, John Howard, Dave Reed, Jane Sauer, Elaine Savorino

City of Cambridge:

Susanne Rasmussen
(CDD)
Bill Deignan (CDD)

Jeff Parenti (TP&T)
Hafthor Yngvason (CAC)

*CDD = Community Development
Department*

*TP&T = Traffic, Parking and
Transportation Department
CAC = Cambridge Arts Council*

Consultant Team and Project Artist:
Jerry Friedman (Earth Tech, Inc.)

Cynthia Smith (Halvorson Design
Partnership)

Toshihiro Katayama (Project Artist)

1. INTRODUCTION AND PUBLIC MEETING UPDATE (Susanne Rasmussen / Bill Deignan)

Susanne welcomed the attendees, introduced the City staff and Consultants present, and reviewed the agenda for the evening (see attached).

The public meeting in February went well – there were lots of comments received both during and after the meeting. Overall, people had favorable responses toward the proposed design. One goal of tonight's meeting is to review the key comments and the City's proposed responses, and get approval from the Committee to move ahead with the design concept.

2. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF PLAZA CONCEPT (Hafthor/Toshi/Cynthia)

Hafthor Yngvason briefly recapped the public art process to date. Toshihiro Katayama was selected as one of three finalists from among a number of potential artists by an independent arts jury. The Art Subcommittee of the Porter Square advisory committee chose him as the project artist. Toshi has since then been working with the art subcommittee, and with Cynthia Smith of Halvorson, to develop a preliminary concept for the art component of the project. It was determined that rather than create a stand-alone piece of art, which might possibly compete with the existing mobile sculpture at the MBTA station as a focal point, the art would be integrated fully into the design of the plaza itself. There is also the potential to use it tie together the various disparate areas of Porter Square, particularly the Plaza and the existing West Headhouse area across Mass Ave.

Toshi then presented his concept, using a model of the Plaza, and a context model showing a larger area. Key aspects and goals of the design are as follows:

- The design of roadways and driveways essentially divides the pedestrian areas into 3 separate pieces. The art design seeks to unify these separate places.
- The design is transferable to the West Headhouse and the main T entrance.
- Porter Square is a place of great visual clutter. The design is based on simple graphic elements that reduce the clutter.
- Porter Square is a naturally very colorful place, due to the high volumes of vehicles and pedestrians moving through. The design uses simple colors and serves as a stage for the activity in the Square.
- Panels of varying design, height, etc. are proposed to screen such elements as trash receptacles, utility poles, telephones, etc, without creating areas where people can hide.
- Fieldstones (boulders) are proposed as seats in the Plaza, and would be placed so as to be useful for resting, but not grouped to encourage congregating.
- If budget permits, and maintenance issues are worked out, it may be desirable to provide low-level lighting under the stones.
- Existing trees and new trees will be part of the design.
- Stone walls are proposed to encourage pedestrians to use marked crosswalks across the left-turn lane, and may also be used to screen elements such as bike parking, etc.
- The basic paving materials used to create the contrasting striped pattern which is proposed, could be any of a variety. The idea is to use a natural material with pleasing color and texture.

Cynthia showed a few physical samples of paving materials that could be considered to provide the proposed stripe effect. Further evaluation and research is necessary to determine material suitability in terms of cost, maintainability, durability, etc. Cynthia also explained some additional technical challenges of the Plaza design, in particular grading and drainage.

CAC Comments and Discussion (City/Consultant/Artist Responses in Italics)

- Good solution – has potential to unify the Square.
- Consider earthier colors, rather than black/white. (*The idea is that people will provide the color in the Plaza, and therefore the hardscape materials should be neutral*)
- Striking concept that would define Porter Square.
- Seating should allow for couples too – not just single seats.
- Like the wall – good idea to control pedestrian flow across the left-turn lane.
- Creative solution – would uniquely define the Square.
- Maybe MBTA could extend the concept on their property.
- Sends message of “pedestrian safety”.
- Concern about how would mesh with existing adjacent materials (brick, tiles, etc.)
- Consider “dark and light” rather than “black and white” theme.
- Concern that boulder seating be universally usable. Proper seat height, back support, arm support is important for older users.
- Consider cutting stones into more seatlike shapes.
- Concern about white or light stripes over time. Staining, dirt, etc. Will they turn brown? (*Will look at other similar installations and see how this has been addressed*)
- What materials would the screens be? Need something graffiti-resistant. (*Material will probably be dictated by budget. Agree that vandal-resistance is important.*)

- Concern that low-level lighting not be similar to that at MBTA Plaza near Commonwealth Lock. *(The low-level lighting discussed would be accent lighting only. There would also be proper overhead illumination of the Plaza.)*
- Like the black and white. The design depends on the strong contrast to make it work.
- Concern about debris collecting in nooks and crannies of the screens, walls, etc.
- Need endowment for maintenance of the Plaza.
- Concern about routine maintenance (how to plow snow, etc.)
- Don't plant too many trees. When they mature, they will block views.
- Pedestrian flow is unclear at rear of Plaza (CVS side). How will peds go from Shopping Ctr. to CVS; or from MBTA to Shopping Center?
- Wall must be beautiful, not ugly.
- Like stripes, because they are potentially transportable to other portions of the Square. Also, doesn't seem to be an overly expensive treatment.
- Getting right height of the wall(s) is important.
- Could individuals donate funds to the project? *(The City does not have a plan to raise private donations, but Committee members are encouraged to investigate potential sources of private donations)*

Bill Deignan delivered additional comments of Si Shapiro and George McCray, who were not able to attend the meeting:

- Generally positive about the concept.
- Concern that wall not be too high, and not too close to driveway, for safety of children who may play on it, sightlines, etc.
- Interested in an interpretive/historical panel somewhere in the Plaza.
- Interested in including a directional/wayfinding element.

Plaza Wrap-Up (Susanne Rasmussen)

In general, it appears that the Committee supports the general concept for the Plaza, and would like to see it move forward, taking into consideration the comments heard tonight.

There will probably be another meeting of the Arts Subcommittee, and then a refined plan will be brought back to the full committee.

3. DISCUSSION OF PUBLIC MEETING COMMENTS (Bill Deignan)

Rather than review all of the comments, we have highlighted ones that we thought were the most contentious, and/or had the most potential to affect the basic design. (see attached)

Pedestrian Features

In response to a comment, we are considering the feasibility of a raised crosswalk across the Davenport Street. The existing concern is that vehicles turning into Davenport from Mass Ave move very quickly – especially vehicles turning left into Davenport from Mass Ave southbound, since they have to wait for a gap in Mass Ave northbound traffic, and then have limited time to get across.

CAC Comments and Discussion (City/Consultant Responses in Italics)

- Did not realize there was a problem here.
- Concern that if turning vehicles are slowed too much, they may be struck by northbound Mass Ave traffic.
- Generally think it's a good idea.

Plaza Wrap-Up (Susanne Rasmussen)

The possibility of a raised crosswalk at Davenport Street will be investigated.

Median Issues

The design proposes to remove a portion of the median in the Allen to Davenport block. Comments were received on all sides of the issue, and the City's response (see attached Responses to Comments Received at Porter Square Community Meeting) generally states that retaining this portion of the median at the expense of either sidewalk width or bicycle lanes would not be desirable. Two new crosswalks with median islands are being provided at desirable crossing points.

CAC Comments and Discussion (City/Consultant Responses in Italics)

- Believe the new unsignalized crosswalks will work – they have come to work very well on Elm Street in Somerville. Cars do tend to stop for peds.
- Existing median is a temptation to jaywalk.
- Bicycle lanes are a good idea – we need to plan for 30 year horizon.
- Doesn't make sense to spend money to narrow existing sidewalks, just to keep a median with no desirable function.
- Unsignalized crosswalks across Mass Ave in Arlington are safe – but there is lots of police enforcement.
- At public meeting, opponents of removal cited safety. But if kept, it would send mixed signals about where to cross.
- Need good markings, and signage to make the new crossings effective and safe.
- Median makes Mass Ave more of a highway.
- Unsignalized crosswalk at Fire Station north of Beech Street works well – cars stop.
- Crosswalks are well spaced to satisfy crossing demand.
- Was originally against removing median, but now see importance of encouraging use of crosswalks.

Median Wrap-Up (Susanne Rasmussen)

In general, it appears that the Committee supports the design as presented at the Public Meeting. The design team will focus on providing effective treatments for the new unsignalized crosswalks.

Removal of Parking

The design as presented at the Public Meeting showed a net loss of 3 parking spaces. This included the removal of 6 parking spaces on the southbound side of Mass Ave. and the addition of 3 spaces on the northbound side. There was concern that loss on the southbound side and the imbalance of new spaces would lead to increased parking on residential side streets, particularly Porter & Regent. Through some minor changes to curblines, we have been able to restore 3 of these parking spaces, at the Cambridge Savings Bank and the Masonic Hall. The plan is now parking neutral overall. The committee approved of the addition of the new parking spaces.

Bicycle Lanes

There were some comments questioning the safety of bike lanes in general, and/or the particular design used in Cambridge. As detailed in the written responses to comments (see attached) Cambridge's bike lane design follows Federal and State guidelines and standards,

and research both nationally and internationally has documented the effectiveness and safety of bike lanes in general.

CAC Comments and Discussion (City/Consultant Responses in Italics)

- It would be crazy not to have bike lanes in Porter Square
- Will be glad to have them when constructed.
- Bike lanes should be part of the plan in planning for long term horizon.
- The defined space for bikes is good for bikes and motorist too.
- Support inclusion of bike lanes in plan (two members.)

Bike Lane Wrap-Up (Susanne Rasmussen)

Bike lanes will remain in the plan as shown and we will continue to refine the details.

Bus Stop Locations

Comments were received from both the public and the MBTA regarding proposed location of bus stops as shown at the Public Meeting. In general, it was expressed that bus stops should not be located immediately before crosswalks, since disembarking bus passengers would walk in front of the bus and not be seen by passing vehicles. There was also concern about two bus stops being located in the middle of "tee" intersections. In response, it is proposed to make the following changes to the design:

White Street: The inbound bus stop has been moved forward, and the Galleria crosswalk has been angled backward to land behind the bus stop. In addition to mitigating the concerns expressed above, this will place the bus stop closer to the existing shelter; will better align the crosswalk with the MBTA headhouse entry; and will improve bus operations by letting the bus get through the traffic signal prior to making its stop.

West Headhouse: The bus stop has been moved onto the bridge over the commuter rail tracks. The MBTA was concerned about bus drivers not knowing whether to proceed through the intersection after stopping, and about conflicts with vehicles exiting the left-turn lane from the shopping center.

Davenport Street: The bus stop has been move back about 20', so that pedestrians will have a clearer view of traffic should they choose to use the Mass Ave crosswalk at Davenport Street. The proper location for buses to stop can be emphasized through placement of bus stop, signs, shelter, street furniture, etc.

CAC Comments and Discussion (City/Consultant Responses in Italics)

- Disappointed about relocation of stop at West Headhouse. This had good potential to increase use of this space.
- White Street outbound bus stop at Galleria is also too close to crosswalk. Consider moving it back 20-30 feet.
- Concerned about passengers leaving buses at the relocated West Headhouse stop, and immediately jaywalking to the median on the bridge. Consider placing fence or barrier on median.

Other General CAC Comments

- Davis Square in Somerville has very effective vehicular signage, which graphically indicates the complex road geometry.

- Would like separate presentation on signage issues.
- Need more visible signs for vehicles, but the area should not look like highway.
- Street-name signs on mast arms may be good idea, but also may deflect motorists' attention from roadway and pedestrians.
- Concern that newspaper box ordinance is not being enforced in the Square. *(The City has a full-time staff person assigned to this – he will be advised of concerns. A new ordinance might be passed which would limit the number of boxes to 8 at any one location.)*

4. PUBLIC COMMENT

- Don't put bus stops in travel lane – vehicular Level of Service will suffer.
- Somerville Avenue bus (#83) is only an infrequent service. Does it need it's own stop at Galleria – can it just share Davenport stop on Mass Ave?
- Left turn from Shopping Center will still interfere with West Headhouse bus stop
- Pedestrian time for crossing at White Street is not very long. At present have median to wait on in middle. Consider crossing island on the Galleria Crosswalk.
- Most recent Orchard Street crosswalk markings are very effective.
- Consider Plaza alternative raised at public meeting – i.e. move parking to currently proposed Plaza location, and put pedestrian space in front of McDonalds, Dunkin' Donuts. Davis Square mini-park is a good example of how this can work right adjacent to private businesses.
- Taxi stand at Dunkin Donuts is used. Don't consider reducing it. *(Senior Citizens also get reduced fare vouchers that are only usable on Cambridge taxis. Cambridge taxis cannot pick-up inside Shopping Center, and so must use this stand)*
- New development on Beech Street will add traffic to Beech Street and project roadways.
- Davenport, Allen, Beech are all heavily used streets now.

5. NEXT STEPS (Susanne Rasmussen)

By the next Committee meeting, would like to accomplish the following:

- Advance Plaza design
- Have meeting with Arts subcommittee on the plaza
- Advance crossing design
- Advance street trees placement, sidewalk paving materials, bus shelters.